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Cultural Values and Learning Styles: A Theoretical Framework and Implications for Management Development

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Abstract

The aim of this research is form a theoretical framework on the impact of individualism and collectivism on learning styles of individuals. By basing on a the theoretical foundations of individualism and collectivism and cultural values, it is proposed that individuals who are high on individualist values grasp experience through the learning mode of abstract conceptualization and transform experience through the learning mode of active experimentation. For the collectivist values in contrast, we proposed that the higher the collectivist values in individuals the more they prefer grasping experience through the learning mode of concrete experience and the more they prefer transforming experience through the learning mode of reflective observation. As a result it can be stated that the trainers should take cultural differences in to account in designing learning activities.

Keywords: Cultural values; learning styles; management development

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1. Introduction

Proliferation of management development programs and training and development interventions both within educational institutions or organizations make the effectiveness of learning and hence learning styles an important concept within the field of management. In the subject of learning styles there have been a significant amount of framework and research within the field of education and management development (see [1], [2], [3], [4], [5])

Of the various models of learning styles Kolb's experiential learning theory and learning style inventory is one of the most widely used model in management education see [6], particularly with a cross cultural flavor [7]. Even though, improving learning is an important concern [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], and cultural values may have an important impact on people's preference of learning [14], [15], [16], [17], [7], which means that effectiveness of training interventions depends on cultural values; there is not enough amount of research devoted to cultural values and learning style relationship.

Most of the research investigating the learning styles [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], did not focus on cultural values investigated only differences among countries or ethnic groups. Some of the studies investigated the relationship between cultural values and learning styles. However, they both taken culture as linked to country of origin rather than investigating the direct impact of cultural value on the learning style dimension [25], [26], [20], [19], [27], [28].

Towards this end, the aim of this study is to establish a theoretical framework about the effect of individualism and collectivism as individual difference variables on learning styles.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Kolb's Learning Styles

According to experiential learning theory learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" [29]. And according to experiential learning theory learning styles represents individual differences and preferences in grasping and transforming experience [29]. According to the experiential learning theory people grasp and transform experiences with two polarized modes [29]. According to this theoretical framework people grasp experience through the modes of concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC) and people transform experience by the modes of reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE) [29]. On one hand the preferred modes of grasping experience is related to preferred degree of concreteness or abstractness in grasping experience [30]. According to the theory the individuals who grasp experience more through concrete experience prefer case studies, application lectures and movies as more effective and individuals who grasp experience more through abstract conceptualization prefer theoretical lectures and readings in grasping experience [30]. In terms of preferred modes transforming experience is related to preferred degree of self role in the learning event [30]. The ones who prefer active experimentation as a learning mode prefer experiments, games and field research in learning which gives them a more active role [30]. On the other hand the ones who prefer reflective observation prefers more educator centered instruction such as programmed instruction and theoretical lecture [30].

The modes of grasping and transforming experiences is called as learning abilities [31], [29]. And four learning styles were identified which is a combination of two learning abilities. The converging learning style learns through the learning abilities of AC and AE [29]. On the other hand, diverging learning style

learns through the learning abilities of CE and reflecting observation [29]. The assimilating learning style learns through the learning abilities of AC and RO [29]. In contrast, the accommodating learning style learns through the abilities of CE and AE [29].

2.2 Individualism and Collectivism

Cultural influences on organizational behavior has become an important area of research with the pioneering work of Hofstede [32]. Hofstede [32] [33] in his works identified five dimensions of culture which are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity femininity, individualism and collectivism [32] and long and short term orientation [33]. Among these cultural value dimensions, the individualism and collectivism dimensions are put forward as the most dominant cultural syndrome [34], and the most influential dimension on organizational psychology [35], [36].

The main distinction between individualism and collectivism dimensions is the construal of self [37]. In collectivism, self is construed as an interdependent entity whose behavior is determined by the norms and values of the social context [37]. On the other hand, in individualism, self is an independent entity whose action is primarily determined by one's own thoughts, feelings and choice and tends to be normless [37], [34]. While individuals in collectivist cultures tend to be same and conform to the environment, individuals in individualist cultures emphasize uniqueness and being different [35]. Individualist cultures emphasize competition and dominance, and collectivist cultures prefer affiliation, agreeableness and harmony [34], [35], [37].

While individualism and collectivism are stated as cultural syndromes, on an individual level of analysis, individuals have access to both the individualist and collectivist cognitive structures [34], [35]. and individualists and collectivists may also exist within a culture in the form of individual differences [38]. Individuals that have more individualist values are called idiocentric and individuals that have more collectivist values are called allocentric [34], [39]. In a cultural level of analysis, in a collectivist society, the dominant form is allocentrics and in an individualist society, the dominant forms tend to be idiocentrics [35], [34], [39].

2.3 Hypothesis Development

As it is argued that cultural values molds the cognitive structure of individuals [34] [37]. and learning styles of individuals is a product of cognitive structure [29]. Therefore, it can be said that cultural values can have an impact of peoples preferred modes of learning.

As we mentioned before one dimension of learning is about grasping the experience. People grasp the experience in two modes which are concrete experience and abstract conceptualization [29]. And this shows the level of abstractness in grasping the experience [30]. According to the theoretical framework the individuals whose preferred learning modes are concrete experience prefers learning from their immediate environments rather than universal symbols and concepts [7]. They learn by using tangible felt qualities of their environment [29]. And people who are high on concrete experience learning skills value interpersonal relationships and are sensitive to others' feelings and values [29]. On the other hand people whose preferred learning modes are abstract conceptualization prefers learning from conceptual models. These people are good at applying and using logic and ideas, making systematic plans and using quantitative analysis [7].

Linking learning styles to cultural values, people who are high on collectivist values have a strong awareness of their context and environment [7]. Furthermore, people who have collectivist values value

interpersonal relationships within their social context [32], [39], [34]. And concrete experience learning mode involves learning from one's from context. Furthermore, people who learn from tangible felt qualities of their environment are sensitive to others and value interpersonal relationships. Therefore the people that are high on collectivist values and who are dependent on their social context and are sensitive to their social context will have learning skills of concrete experience which involves learning from the felt qualities of social context; and who value interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, people who are high on individualist values will have a more independent and more detached from their environment [37], [39], [34]. And as a result these individuals prefer using context free abstract and generalized characterizations [37], [40]. Furthermore Choi and Nisbett found that western people who are high on individualist values depend on logical thinking in contrast to eastern style holistic thinking [41]. As a result, it can be said that individuals who use context free characterizations [37], [40] and who use logical thinking [42]. will prefer abstract conceptualization learning mode which is based on context free learning and which calls for logical thinking abilities [7]. Therefore the hypothesis of this research regarding individualism collectivism and individuals' preferred modes of grasping experience are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The more individualist the individual, the more she/he grasps experience through the learning mode of abstract conceptualization.

Hypothesis 2: The more collectivist the individual, the more she/he grasps the experience through the learning mode of concrete experience.

As we mentioned before according to experiential learning theory the second dimension of learning is transforming the experience [29]. And people transform experience in two ways which are reflective observation and active experimentation. The people whose preferred learning mode is reflective observation watch and listen others and reflect upon their observation [7], [29]. Furthermore reflective observation is the degree of self-involvement in the transforming of experience [30]. When they prefer transform experience by reflective observation they prefer a more trainer centered learning [30]. People who are high on collectivist values, value more the opinion and the choice of their social context such as a trusted authority or their friends [34]. Moreover collectivist individuals prefer being interdependent rather than being autonomous. Therefore individuals who have collectivist values, because of their interdependence and context orientation will use learning mode of reflective observation which is a less self-involved mode of learning which depends on reflecting upon social context [30]. Individuals who have individualist values in contrast, are more risk taking and self-initiative [34], [39]. And the learning mode of active experimentation involves learning by doing. It requires taking initiative and learning by taking risks rather than watching someone. When thinking of individualist and collectivist values people who are high on individualist are more self-confident, take risks and self-starter. In contrast, collectivism is correlated with uncertainty avoidance which means that people do not like taking risks. Furthermore, people in collectivist societies depend on their friends or trusted persons choices rather than their own. Therefore it can be said that rather than taking risks and being a self-starter and depending on their self, collectivist individuals will prefer learning by observing the others. They will prefer learning by observing their environment. On the other hand, individualist individuals who take risks, who are self-starter and who depend on their self rather than context will prefer learning by their selves rather than observing their social context. Therefore the hypotheses of individualism collectivism and transforming experience are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The more individualist the individual, the more she/he transforms experience through the learning mode of active experimentation.

Hypothesis 2: The more collectivist the individual, the more she/he transforms the experience through the learning mode of reflective observation.

3. Conclusion

In this research firstly, we established a theoretical framework and proposed hypothesis regarding how individualist and collectivist values of individuals can affect their learning styles. We mainly proposed that individuals who are high on individualist values will learn by self and rather than in relation to or from their environments. Thus, we said that, they will prefer learning through the learning modes of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In contrast to individualist values, individuals who are high on collectivist values will prefer learning from their environment or in relation to their environment. Hence, it is argued that individuals who are high on collectivist values will prefer learning modes of concrete experience and reflective observation.

In terms of practical implications of our arguments, in recent years there is an increase in the expenditure to management training and development interventions both in higher education institutions or other training agencies and institutions. While designing our learning programs, the trainers should take the cultural context into consideration. Furthermore, they also need to consider that individuals are also diverse in terms of cultural values and learning styles hence they should organize their learning programs in order to capture the different learning preferences of people who have different cultural orientations.

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